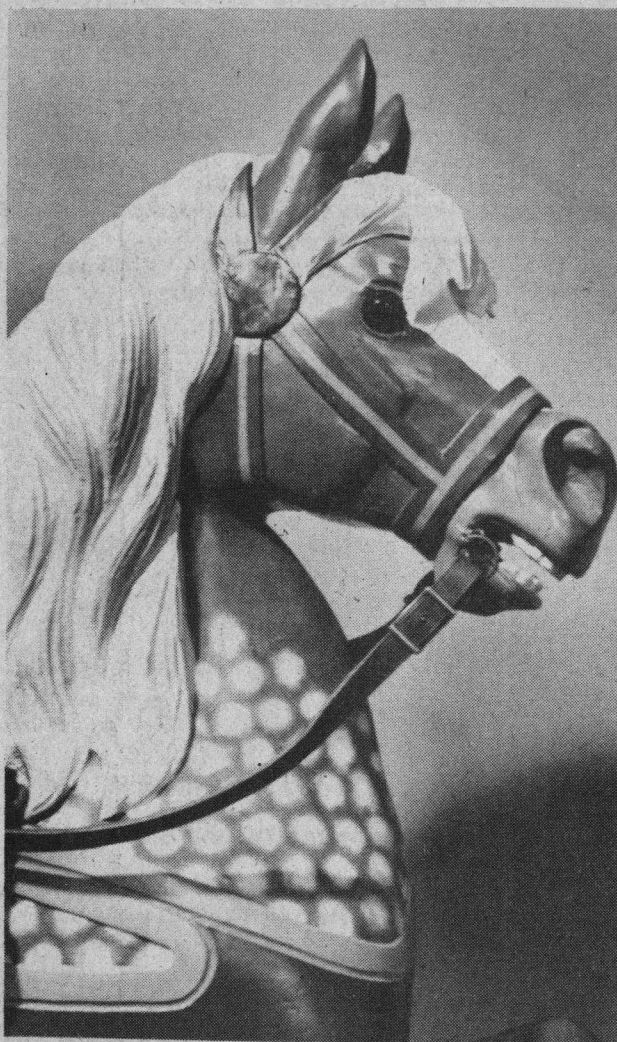


Galloping horses, grinning bears stir memories

By CANDACE ATKINS

How does an art critic say something profound about merry-go-round animals, I wanted to know. The current exhibit at the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County is "Carrousel Animals," and until this week, merry-go-rounds to me, meant gaudy organ music played at a thunderous pitch, make-believe animals somehow keeping pace with the tumultuous



rhythm and dozens of sticky-faced kids begging their parents for "just one more ride — pleeeeee, Mom."

As an adult, riding on a carrousel brought forth a different childhood memory with every turn — all of the sudden, it would be the early 1950s, and I, atop my wooden jumper "Flame," (I always named the horses I rode) would see Grandpa, in his eternal patience, seated on one of those wooden benches outside the ride, holding my sack of popcorn, and fishing out yet another dime from his pocket as the music would grind down. It was a given that I would want another turn, and a given that he would buy the ten-cent ticket. In the background, my older brother's menacing voice would call.

"Hey, stupid!," he'd say. "You can't even get a ring!"

I wasn't stupid. I was short. I was also securely strapped (Grandpa again) to Flame, who was in the center row of the carrousel. You couldn't reach the ring dispenser unless you were on one of the big horses in the outside circle.

But to a 5-year-old, Flame was a horse of grandiose proportions. His muscular neck strained forward, and his legs were frozen in mid-air. Two chocolate colored glass eyes and an open mouth, exposing a perfect set of white teeth, added to his almost fierce-looking countenance. It was exhilarating to be half afraid of Flame, yet trust the wooden beast with your life.

Flame must have carried thousands of 5-year-olds in his day. For Flame and other carrousel animals to be described as art is a bonus — and it is a legitimate claim.

To move from Flame-the-protector to Flame-the-art-form is surprisingly easy at the Art Museum show.

With 28 handcarved animals and seven merry-go-round panels, viewers have the chance to examine the creatures when they are on solid ground. There are no cotton candy strands, or cinnamon apples stuck to the saddles and manes, but there is boisterous circus music in the background. The show is very popular with young folk, and their repeated squeals of delight at the carved reindeer, tiger, cat, bunny — and horses, add even more fun to the show.

Animals produced by famous carrousel carvers

Charles Loeff, Gustav Dentzel, Salvatore "Cherni" Cernigliaro, staff of the Philadelphia Toboggan Company and European artists, are on display.

Several of the horses have been stripped down to the wood, and exhibit-goers can easily see the different methods of construction. In addition, there is a horse "skeleton" on display to illustrate the assembly technique used to construct many carrousel animals.

Travelling carrouseles required animals that could be quickly dismantled, with pieces that could be easily and compactly stored. There are examples of this type of horse in the Art Museum show, and they are easily identified.

Viewers are greeted in the hall in front of the Art Museum with a handsome black horse, and right inside the door is one of the world's finest bunnies. The detail on the rabbit is wonderful, even down to his red and pink eyes. Anatomically, the animal is not exactly correct, but when one considers that carvers had to produce works that would hold children safely as well as look like the real thing — and often have the capacity to be dismantled dozens of times every year — the art quickly goes beyond whittling.

By far, the most charming animals in the show are the ones that have the chipped paint, cracked heads and missing "jewels" from their trappings. Several animals have been restored to a pristine elegance, but are sterile in comparison to the 1910 French cow, for example, which gallops in mid-air, adorned in a chipped and faded paint job that shows several touch-up jobs over the past half-century. The cow is still on the carrousel pole, and a high degree of will power is required not to climb aboard.

To help the very young with an often overwhelming urge to touch the animals, there is a fat English bear to sit upon. His saddle is in awful, yet delightful, coral and shades of purple, and a garland of bright flowers drape around his neck.

Several of the animals in the exhibit were carved by Charles Loeff, who built the carrousel at the Santa Cruz Boardwalk in 1910 and 1911. One of the most spectacular creatures in the show is by Loeff — a giant buffalo constructed in 1885. This is a rare piece; only three others are known in this country.

Loeff's detail is exquisite. The buffalo is an

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excellent example of the artist's style — his animals were usually gentle, yet strong, often with bulging eyes and teeth set in a grin.

One of the first artists in the United States to carve carrousel animals, Loeff was also one of the most talented. His style was often copied by others, and his distinctive trait of a saddlebag or a blanket tucked behind a carved saddle was soon imitated.

One of the more famous carrousel animals, a galloping cat with a fish in his mouth, stands in the rear of the Art Museum. Although William Dentzel is credited with this happy, delightful feline, Frederick Fried, author of "A Pictorial History of the Carrousel," gives Salvatore Cernigliaro credit for both the design and carving of the Dentzel Cat. Cernigliaro was a longtime employee of Gustav Dentzel, William Dentzel's father.

Patrons will be hard pressed to select a favorite animal. Children love the barnyard animals, and the restored-to-perfection horses. Adults seem to favor the animals they rode when they were children. Too-bright colors, chipped ears and missing saddle jewels make the beasts even more attractive.

A 20-minute, informative and entertaining tape-recorded tour of the show is available to viewers at no charge.

"Carrousel Animals" will be on display through Aug. 29 at the Art Museum of Santa Cruz County, located upstairs in the Santa Cruz Public Library, 224 Church St. Open noon to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, with evening hours on Thursdays until 9 p.m. Admission is \$1 general, free on Sundays.